

# Guitars in antiquity

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If you were asked to name a stringed musical instrument used in the ancient world, as likely as not your answer would be the lyre or *kithara*. However, if you were to reply the lute or guitar you would be equally correct, although this might surprise some.

Guitars have a long history behind them; they are found depicted on clay tablets from Babylon dating from 1900 B.C., on Hittite reliefs of the fourteenth century B.C., and most frequently of all on many artefacts from ancient Egypt, where they were called 'nefers'. We even have a surviving Egyptian lute belonging to a court musician of the 15th century B.C. (complete with plectrum).

Lute playing in general in ancient Egypt seems to have been as lightly disreputable activity, mainly confined to scantily clad entertaining girls, who appear on many illustrations, some of which also preserve the lyrics of the songs sung. These invariably exhort the listener to enjoy the good life; compare the ninth chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament!

## **The classical guitar**

The earliest depiction of a Greek guitar-like instrument is on a relief from Mantinea in the Peloponnese, dating from the fourth century B.C., showing a seated muse playing a long-necked stringed instrument. The centre of the relief is damaged, but we can see the sounding-box is distinct from the instrument's neck and that its bottom ends in a triangle, suggesting it had an arched back, rather like that of the earlier Egyptian instruments or the lute of medieval times.

The long history of the guitar in the near East and the late fourth century date of this relief have led some to suggest that it was Alexander's conquests in the East which introduced the guitar to Greece. But it could have arrived at a much earlier date; for example a terracotta of a player of a guitar-like instrument found at the cemetery at Gesher in Egypt is sometimes thought to be Minoan, and there was supposed to be a statue of a Muse playing a lute by the archaic sculptor Lesbothemis at Mitylene. The position of Mitylene, just off the coast of Asia Minor, would have been an ideal spot for such diffusion to happen.

## **Pandoura's box**

This long-necked guitar was not the only sort found in Classical Greece. There was a second, smaller sort of instrument which was more pear-shaped than the long-necked kind, without a sharp break between the sounding-box and the rest of the instrument. It appears to have been very popular in the near East throughout the classical period; it is shown on Sassanid Persian artefacts and on the curious half-Greek, half-Indian art, known as Gandharan sculpture, from the North West Frontier of Pakistan.

All our ancient sources agree that these instruments came from the East: the most common name used for them was the *pandoura*. This term is probably the Greek form of the Sumerian word *Pan-Tur*, meaning 'small bow'. The word has given us the modern 'mandolin' and eastern 'Tambur', and persisted as the name of a lute until the sixteenth century, when it was the subject of a treatise by the mystic and philosopher Robert Fludd. The *pandoura* had three strings: there was a smaller version called the *pandourion* which we are told could be played without a plectrum, implying one was needed to play its bigger brother.

## **Music of the dead**

Most of our illustrations of these instruments come from the Roman period and are found on sarcophagi or tombstones. The most common form shows a central roundel with a guitar player, or a banquet scene where several instrumentalists are present. It is interesting that all the guitar players are women, presumably representing Muses. The significance of the guitar in this context is unknown, but seems to be representative of the 'musical', i.e. cultured, aspects of life.

Although most of our illustrations show *pandourae* with oval lute-like bodies, others have the figure-of-eight shape of the modern guitar. This is also true of three surviving instruments from the Coptic period in Egypt (4-8th centuries A.D.). These vary in size: two are around 1 metre long, but the third measures only 45 cms, making it more the ancient equivalent of the ukelele than the guitar. Not only do these instruments have a modern guitar-shaped sounding-box, but the back of this box is also more like the modern guitar in being almost flat rather than rounded. The sounding-boxes are, like the earlier Egyptian example, pierced in various places for extra resonance.

## **Lutatia Lupata**

One of these Egyptian instruments has four strings, so the *pandoura* was not the only type of guitar found in the ancient world. The four-stringed version was apparently known as the *skindapsos*: it is shown on the tombstone of a young girl, Lutatia Lupata, who died aged 16 at Merida in Spain. Unlike other tombstones with guitar players which seem to show

idealized players to symbolize the good life, we seem to have a genuine portrait of Lutatia here. Of even more interest is that the dedicant of the stone, Lutatia Severa, describes Lutatia Lupata as her *alumna*. Although, given the similarity of the two names, this could be simply a term of endearment between mother and daughter, perhaps Julia was Lutatia's teacher, maybe a freedwoman connected to the family. Another possibility is that it was Lutatia Severa who owned Lupata and was training her to be a professional entertainer.

Another four-stringed variety of guitar, which gave its name to a kind of siege engine, was the *sambuke*. This we are told was 'high-pitched', 'lyre-like', and used by dancing girls, suggesting it was quite small. It too hailed from the East and was regarded as having a Parthian origin. Some terracottas from Turkey and Africa show what looks very much like a banjo, while another related instrument, perhaps called the *psaltarium*, appears on some Roman sarcophagi. This looked like the Indian sitar, long and thin, with up to ten strings, and a small sounding-box at the base: just the thing for George Harrison!

### **Schizophrenic reputation**

All these instruments probably sounded more like the medieval lute than the present-day guitar. Several illustrations show frets on their necks and the left hand being used to stop strings in the same way as the modern guitar player. But what sort of tunes they were used to play can only be guessed at: we do not even know how they were tuned.

The guitar in antiquity appears to have had the same schizophrenic reputation as it enjoys today. The idealized depictions of Muses playing guitars on sarcophagi imply that guitar playing was regarded at one level as a 'cultured' activity. On the other hand the *sambuke* enjoyed a lurid reputation and its players, usually female and from Eastern settings, were often regarded as prostitutes and on occasions performed naked. By the reign of the Emperor Theodosius in the fourth century A.D., concerts by 'music girls' had been banned, even at private parties, for the sake of the empire's moral well-being.

We know very little about professional individual players. Appropriately enough Spain probably provides us with one in Lutatia Severa. A Christian tombstone of a *pandouristes*, Thorna, has been found at the other end of the empire in Jerash, and another late example, this time from a Latin speaking part of the empire, Dalmatia, records the grave of the *pandurius* Julianus.

Perhaps the popularity of the guitar in the ancient world grew with the passing of time; it is certainly true that most of our examples come from late rather than early antiquity. By the Carolingian period and early Middle Ages, there is a profusion of instruments of the guitar family illustrated on manuscripts and comparatively few harps. By the Renaissance the

guitar had so superseded the harp family that we find it was legitimate to illustrate even famous citharists of antiquity, such as Orpheus and Arion, as guitar players.

Finally it must be mentioned that the *pandoura* enjoyed imperial patronage. The emperor Elagabalus numbered the playing of the *pandoura* amongst his accomplishments. Unfortunately unlike that other musical emperor, Nero, with whom he had much in common in other ways too, he did not issue any coins showing himself performing. Elagabalus was killed by his guard while hiding in the toilet: given the *pandoura*'s reputation, is it too much to imagine one of his assassins confronting him with the words 'We don't need no guitarman'?

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